The Canadian Institute of Strategic Studies
STRATEGIC DATALINK
de L'Institut Canadien D'Études Stratégiques

WILL TERRORISTS GO NUCLEAR?

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Strategic Datalink #122
September, 2004

Introduction

After the dreadful hostage-taking at Beslan in southern Russia in which at least 338 people died, one wonders if there are any remaining moral, political, or strategic constraints on terrorists that might prevent them from using nuclear weapons. The use of such weapons is subject to a supposedly universal taboo, yet the taboo against deliberately harming civilians (including children) is supposed to be even stronger.[1]

The lethality of terrorist attacks has been steadily increasing over the past two decades, partly because of tactical and technical developments which culminated in '9/11', but also because there seems to have been a steady upping of the ante, an apparent perception by terrorists that it is necessary to kill ever larger numbers of people to achieve their goals. This process tends to be self-reinforcing, as each attack further erodes by its example whatever remaining moral or political constraints against mass-casualty terrorism there might be among terrorists in general.

Any group contemplating mass-casualty or mass-destruction terrorism, especially nuclear terrorism, does so within the context of a number of constraining or facilitating factors. Politically and strategically, they include the group's internal dynamics and leadership, its ideology (if any), its claimed or actual constituency, its relationship with its host state or states and their positions in the international system, the terrorists' targets, and the likely lethality or destructiveness of the contemplated attack. There are also psycho-social factors that might differentiate between groups that are otherwise similarly situated.

This paper will treat nuclear terrorism as a special case of mass-casualty, mass-destruction terrorism. While it is not at all clear that improvised nuclear devices or radiological devices would in fact cause widespread death and destruction, the decision to 'go nuclear' would necessarily involve the intention to do so. For the purposes of this discussion we will ignore the very substantial technical issues involved and concentrate exclusively on the 'Would they?' part of the question, 'Would they if they could?'[2]

It should also be remembered that while they are often treated as one, nuclear and radiological weapons have somewhat different effects on a target area. (The blast effects of the latter are several orders of magnitude less than those of the former.) However, since both weapons involve radiation, which tends to provoke certain anxieties in the public mind, the use or implied threat of use of either type of weapon might have similar political effects on a target state.

This paper will explore the categories of terrorism established by Jerrold Post, a professor of political psychology at George Washington University, with a view to linking terrorists' *modus operandi* to the possible employment of unconventional weapons. Dr. Post breaks terrorism down into several distinct varieties: social-revolutionary terrorism, nationalist-separatist terrorism, right-wing terrorism, religious extremist terrorism, (subsuming both religious fundamentalist terrorism and terrorism perpetrated by non-traditional religious groups such as Japan's Aum Shinrikyo), and single-issue terrorism.[3]

Nationalist-separatists

There is a widely-held belief that nationalist groups are constrained from mass-casualty terrorism, especially nuclear terrorism, by the "values of their base constituency," the risks of an "an overwhelming international backlash," and the hopes of gaining international support for their separatist causes.[4] Traditionally, nationalists attack clearly-identified elements of the state and try to avoid inflicting civilian casualties. The case of the Real IRA, which disbanded itself after outraging its constituency with its 1998 bombing of a shopping centre in Omagh, northern Ireland, that killed 28 and injured 200, is a good illustration of the risks of breaking these rules – at least in a developed country. In other states 28 deaths might hardly be noticed.

However, there is nothing in this view to suggest that nationalist-separatist terrorists would or should be constrained from acts of mass-casualty or nuclear terror-

ism against state military or paramilitary targets, especially when they have the support of a deeply aggrieved and politicized constituency.

In any case, there have been enough attacks against civilians to undermine the idealistic image of the nationalist 'freedom fighter'. Chechen separatists have taken up to 1,500 hostages in a single incident, while Sikh separatists were responsible for killing 329 people in the bombing of an Air India passenger jet in 1985. This was the worst aviation terrorism incident before '9/11'.

Moral constraints aside, there are more pragmatic calculations that could influence nationalists' decision on whether or not to engage in mass-casualty or nuclear terrorism. Secessionist territories are, by definition, within the target state's legal boundaries. But target and constituency populations are frequently intermingled and weapons of mass effect (WME) are, by definition, indiscrete in their effects. It is hard to imagine that a Palestinian group, for example, would attack Israel with WME of any sort, not only because of the risk of harming Arabs, but also because of the guaranteed savagery of Israeli retaliation. However, when the terrorists' targets are far removed from the home territory and populations are clearly differentiated, as in the Chechen case, constraints would be weaker.

It is possible that desperation or ideology might drive some nationalist organizations - especially those influenced by religious beliefs - beyond apparently rational cost-benefit calculations. This argument has been made with regard to Palestinian Islamist groups.[5] The same might apply to some Chechen separatists. Those at Beslan must have considered their constituency's views on the choice of target (a children's school) before they acted, and concluded that those views were supportive, neutral, or irrelevant. It is entirely possible that they would assume an equal degree of latitude in their choice of weapons – including radiological or nuclear ones.

The special properties of nuclear weapons might lead separatists to seek them as bargaining or blackmail tools or to give them 'state-like' attributes, if only in the eyes of their constituents. For example, it is easy to imagine a powerful upwelling of nationalist pride in certain Chechen circles if the militants who seized the Nord-Ost theatre in Moscow in 2002 had rigged up an improvised nuclear device rather than the conventional explosives they actually used.

Using a nuclear weapon for political leverage could be problematic, however. As Brian Jenkins points out, governments simply could not comply with some essentially impossible demands, such as their own dissolution, that would be commensurate with the threat.

> Nor could terrorists enforce permanent policy changes unless they maintained the threat indefinitely. And if a government could not be assured that the threat would be dismantled once the demands were met, it would have little incentive to negotiate. … [The terrorists] might find nuclear weapons to be as useless as they are powerful.[6]

This argument is not entirely convincing. While it might apply to the developed states that are the likely targets of nuclear terrorism, it is possible that the governments of some weak states – in Africa, perhaps – could succumb to the threat of nuclear blackmail and essentially hand the government over to the terrorists. Although weak states would probably not be the primary target, they might be very attractive secondary one when nuclear terrorists were looking for sanctuary.

In general, though, there is still some reason to believe that nationalists would not be first in line to use WME, especially nuclear or radiological ones, despite the growing lethality of the tactics of some groups and the precedents they have set. Where movements have a significant level of international support, the use of WME, no matter how carefully targeted, would be counterproductive. South Africa's African National Congress, for example, would have sacrificed much or all of its considerable political capital if it had used WME in its armed struggle against apartheid. Similarly, if the political culture of the constituent group was deeply opposed to certain tactics, terrorists might be quite tightly constrained, as was the case with the Real IRA.

Social-revolutionaries

Social-revolutionary groups,[7] whether on the left or right of the political spectrum, are founded on the belief that the entire political and economic structure of a given state, and more usually the entire world, must be destroyed in order that a better one might be erected. Jerrold Post, however, argues that they operate under many of the same constraints that influence nationalists, although he concedes that "discriminate acts against government or symbolic capitalist targets could be rationalized by these groups."[8]

This argument is questionable on a number of grounds. While Post might be correct about some groups, the nature of revolutionary ideologies and their typical practitioners could quite easily permit or encourage terrorism on a massive scale, even if the group was claiming to act on behalf of a larger constituency such as 'the working class.'

All revolutionary ideologies have certain attributes: first, they allow the core group to see itself as a tiny, embattled, but chosen elite; second, they are global and all-inclusive, rather than limited to a particular state or territory; third, they allow almost any individual or group to be designated as enemy collaborators, or simply as expendable in the struggle for a greater good. Finally, while the leaders of revolutionary groups are invariably charismatic, they are often markedly paranoid, with grandiose beliefs about themselves, their mission, and the ultimate rightness of their cause. It would be a mistake, therefore, to assume that they would necessarily make the same rational strategic and political calculations that nationalists might – not that all nationalists are necessarily rational.

Paradoxically, the current absence of significant international support for revolutionary movements might actually encourage nuclear terrorism. If there are no state supporters to alienate, then that potential constraint is void. Similarly, revolutionary groups might be tiny, with few or no attachments to particular peo-

ple, communities, or places, and therefore no specific constituencies or social pressures to hold them in check. Under these circumstances, the decision to go nuclear would seem to be more technical and pragmatic than ideological or humanitarian.

Which leads us to consider revolutionary right-wing terrorism. This is a topic that has been given a rather low profile since the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent focus on transnational Islamist terror. Although violent activity on the far right has diminished somewhat in recent years, Timothy McVeigh's bombing of the Alfred E. Murragh building in Oklahoma City in 1995 set "the precedent for massively destructive domestic terrorism."[9]

With that notable exception, however, most right-wing terrorism so far has been little more than simple thuggery, generally uncoordinated, ill-planned and executed, and causing limited casualties or damage. Most incidents emanating from this quarter have been classified as hate crimes rather than terrorism because there has been little evidence that they were part of a coordinated political program.

There is, however, another side to right-wing violence in North America - one that is explicitly anti-government and implicitly or explicitly revolutionary, sometimes distinctly cult-like, and with goals that reach beyond the mere victimization of various categories of 'others.' It is manifested in some militia, Christian fundamentalist, 'freemen', and 'patriot' movements. The common thread which unites them is an unshakeable belief that the central government is intrusive and illegitimate; that it has no right to levy taxes, control gun ownership, and so forth. In some instances these beliefs add up to a revolutionary ideology.

Despite right-wing extremists' relatively limited history of large-scale terrorism, it might take very little - perhaps just action plans to match the visions of some of the leaders and members of anti-government groups - to vault them into the mass-casualty, mass-destruction league. Would Timothy McVeigh, for example, have been constrained on moral rather than technical grounds from using WME? For such people the symbolic qualities of nuclear or radiological weapons could be immensely attractive, gratifyingly confirming their own importance while placing them instantly on a par, at least in their own eyes, with their governmental enemies.

Religious terrorism

It is hardly necessary to emphasize the importance of religio-political terrorism today. Indeed, it is widely thought that religious extremist terrorists have the greatest propensity for mass-casualty terrorism because they lack many of the political and psychological constraints that might bear upon other groups. This is demonstrably so in the case of al Qaida.

In the 1970s and 1980s most terrorism was carried out either by nationalist separatists or by social revolutionaries who would regularly claim responsibility for their acts in an attempt to influence public opinion and government policy. In recent years, however, "upwards of 40%" of terrorist incidents occur without claims of responsibility. Post says this is because the perpetrators "do not need their name identified in a *New York Times* headline or on a story on CNN. They are 'killing in the name of God' and don't need official notice; after all, God knows. ... These groups are accordingly particularly dangerous, for they are not constrained by Western reaction, indeed often wish [sic] to expel secular modernizing influences."[10]

'9/11' clearly showed that some religio-political terrorists are eager to commit mass-casualty terrorism, while al Qaida is known to have had, and quite possibly still has, an active interest in acquiring nuclear or radiological weapons, although there is no evidence that it ever succeeded. The very characteristics of nuclear weapons that might repel 'traditional' nationalists or separatists could well be their most attractive features for religio-political terrorists.

Violence by religious cults has usually lacked political motives and has typically been turned inwards, towards members, rather than against the outer world. But even this has resulted in very large numbers of deaths, as illustrated by the Jonestown, Guyana massacre of 1978 when 900 members of a psuedo-religious cult were compelled by various means to take poison. Although it is not terrorism in the usual sense, one writer argues that "it seems that the line between internal and external violence is a thin one, and could be crossed relatively easily, depending on a combination of circumstances and doctrinal beliefs."[11]

While one could debate the claim that inward-directed violence could as easily turn outward, there are already enough examples of outward-directed violence by cults to cause grave concern. This is not surprising given that cult members, like social revolutionaries, can have inflated notions of their role in shaping society; their thinking is at least as rigid, inclusive, and self-justifying.

By far the most striking example of a terrorist cult is Aum Shinrikyo which, at its peak, had a net worth of (US)$1-billion and 50,000 members worldwide.[12] It gained international notoriety with a sarin nerve gas attack that killed twelve people on the Tokyo subway in 1995.[13] Aum was found to have a facility "designed to produce sarin, not on a small terrorist scale, but in nearly battlefield quantities: thousands of kilograms a year."[14] Aum also produced VX gas, and attempted to attack Shinjuku Station in Tokyo using a simple binary device capable, had it worked as planned, of producing enough hydrogen cyanide gas to kill between 10,000 and 20,000 people.[15] Aum is positively known to have been interested in nuclear weapons, although it abandoned that direction in the early 1990s, preferring to concentrate on chemical and biological weapons.

Aum's beliefs were strongly apocalyptic; its leader, Shoko Asahara, published a series of books predicting a nuclear war between the US and Japan, "with salvation only coming at the end of Armageddon to those who adopted the Aum faith."[16] Japanese government sources told U.S. Senate researchers that they were "concerned from analyzing cult teachings that Aum may have 'decided to speed things up' by instigating the predicted war between Japan and the United States in November, 1995."[17] However, the subway gas attack appar-

ently targeted 'Jewish Japanese', the "cosmopolitan Japanese, government officials and members of the business establishment in Tokyo who in the group's view exemplified the internationalism and materialism that it hated," rather than being intended to precipitate the apocalypse.[18] We will never know exactly what Aum would have done had it not been stopped in time, but it was clearly prepared to use chemical weapons on a massive scale.

Single-issue terrorism

Single-issue terrorism is frequently identified with ecological or environmental terrorism. This paper will be concerned with a specific subset: anti-nuclear terrorism. Attacks of this nature are normally directed against existing nuclear power plants or those under construction. Anti-nuclear activism is largely the preserve of identifiable (versus underground) constituencies, including those professing legitimate concerns for the environment. Accordingly, "violence against both persons and property - that is, terrorism - is almost unanimously condemned by contemporary social movements with close ties to the left in the United States"[19] and in most other democracies – at least for the moment.

Nonetheless, there is a very slight possibility that activists on the farthest fringes of the environmental movement might be moved to damage a reactor or otherwise cause a radiation release in the not entirely unreasonable belief that it would turn public sentiment against the nuclear power by dramatically demonstrating its dangers.

Conclusion

Although it is impossible to predict terrorist behaviour, it may be possible to develop a profile of groups with a propensity to engage in mass-casualty terror. One must remember, however, that there is a host of powerful constraints at play, and that the level of motivation is not the sole measure of the risk that a group will actually go nuclear. But combine a high level of motivation with a well-developed technical capacity and access to nuclear materials, and the risk is considerable.

Notes:

[1] Unfortunately, this is in many ways a thoroughly ethnocentric position. The hundreds of thousands of children presently under arms around the world and the millions who have been deliberately or 'accidentally' victimised by wars in recent years bear witness to this 'taboo' being far from universal.

[2] After Gary Ackerman & Laura Snyder "Would They If They Could?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May/June 2002 (http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/2002/mj02/mj02ackerman.html)

[3] Jerrold M. Post "Differentiating the Threat of Radiological/Nuclear Terrorism: Motivations and Constraints" Prepared for Presentation to Conference on Nuclear Terrorism, International Atomic Energy Administration, Vienna, Austria. November 2, 2001. (Provided by kind courtesy of the author. Page references are per the Microsoft®Word® original.) p. 3

[4] Charles D. Ferguson and William C. Potter, *The Four Faces of Nuclear Terrorism* (Monterey: Center for Nonproliferation Studies, 2004) p. 19

[5] Gary Ackerman & Laura Snyder "Would They If They Could?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, May/June 2002 (http://www.thebulletin.org/issues/2002/mj02/mj02ackerman.html)

[6] Brian M. Jenkins, "Is Nuclear Terrorism Plausible?" in Paul Leventhal and Yonah Alexander (eds.) Preventing Nuclear Terrorism (Lexington, MA/Toronto: Lexington Books, 1987) p. 32

[7] There are at least two related usages of 'revolution'. That pertaining to the use of violence to enforce a change of government in a particular state, but not necessarily to dramatically change the fundamental social, economic, or political order, is dealt with in the 'nationalist separatist' section.

[8] Jerrold M. Post, "Differentiating the Threat", *op. cit.*, p.5

[9] Richard A. Falkenrath, Robert D. Newman, and Bradley A. Thayer *America's Achilles' Heel: Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Terrorism and Covert Attack*, BCSIA Studies in International Security (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998) p. 195

[10] Post, "Differentiating the Threat," ibid.

[11] Jean-François Mayer, "Cults, Violence and Religious Terrorism: An International Perspective" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, No. 24, 2001, pp. 362-363

[12] Senate Government Affairs Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations Staff Statement *Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction: A Case Study on the Aum Shinrikyo* October 31, 1995 reproduced by Federation of American Scientists (http://www.fas.org/irp/congress/1995_rpt/aum/)

[13] Factual material on Aum Shinrikyo drawn from: *Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction, ibid.*; Kyle B. Olson "Aum Shinrikyo: Once and Future Threat?" *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, Vol. 5 No. 4 July/August, 1999, (special issue), pp. 513-516; and Jackie Fowler, "Aum Shinrikyo", *The Religious Movements Homepage Project @The University of Virginia*, (http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/aums.html), except where otherwise indicated.

[14] Kyle B. Olson, *ibid.*, p. 514

[15] "V: Crimes of the Cult," *Global Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction*, op. cit.

[16] "III: Background of the Cult," *ibid.*

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] *Ibid.*

[19] Robert Futrell and Barbara G. Brents "Protest as Terrorism? The Potential for Violent Anti-Nuclear Activism" *American Behavioral Scientist*, Vol. 46 No. 6, February 2003, p. 748

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For a thorough discussion of similar matters, see Jerrold M. Post, Keven G. Ruby, & Eric D. Shaw "The Radical Group in Context: 2. Identification of Critical Elements in the Analysis of Risk for Terrorism by Radical Group Type" *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 25, 2002

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